

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 24, 2021
8:03 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky (via teleconference)
Representative Grier Hopkins
Representative Mike Prax
Representative Mike Cronk
Representative Ronald Gillham

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

- HEARD

PRESENTATION(S): FY 2021 STUDENT ENROLLMENT & COVID-19 FEDERAL RELIEF FUNDING

- HEARD AND HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

MICHAEL JOHNSON, PhD, Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave a PowerPoint presentation titled, "Introduction to 'DEED.'"

ERIN HARDIN, Special Assistant to the Commissioner/Legislative Liaison
Office of the Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Assisted with providing a PowerPoint presentation titled, "Introduction to 'DEED.'"

HEIDI TESHNER, Director

Division of Finance and Support Services-Administrative Services
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided the committee with updates on FY 21 student enrollment.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:03:01 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HARRIET DRUMMOND called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:03 a.m. Representatives Cronk, Prax, Zulkosky (via teleconference), Hopkins, Gillham, Story, and Drummond were present at the call to order.

PRESENTATION(S) : ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

[8:04:13 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced that the first order of business would be a presentation titled, "Alaska Department of Education and Early Development."

[8:04:55 AM](#)

MICHAEL JOHNSON, PhD, Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), first pointed out that the department works with the committee during the interim as well as during session. He began with slide 2 of a PowerPoint presentation titled "Introduction to 'DEED'" [hard copy included in the committee packet]. He explained he would provide a high-level overview of the department, discuss student achievement, and touch on COVID-19 impacts.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON moved to slide 3 and stated that education begins and is maintained in the home. However, he continued, from a public policy perspective it begins with the Alaska State Constitution. He urged committee members to read transcripts from the Alaska Constitutional Convention that led to Article VII, Section 1, of the constitution, which states:

The legislature shall by general law establish and maintain a system of public schools open to all children of the state, and may provide for other public educational institutions. Schools and institutions so established shall be free from sectarian control. No money shall be paid from public funds for the direct benefit of any religious or other private educational institution.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON displayed slide 4 and discussed DEED's mission and vision statement adopted by the Alaska State Board of Education & Early Development. He read from the mission statement, which states: "An excellent education for every student every day." He added that this applies even when there is a pandemic. He then read from the vision statement, which states: "All students will succeed in their education and work, shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves, exemplify the best values of society, and be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them." He said he particularly appreciates that the vision statement chosen by the state board comes from the legislature through [Alaska Statute 14.03.015].

[8:10:59 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON turned to slide 5 and specified that to adequately implement its responsibility to maintain a system of public education, DEED must be clear about its purpose. In its daily work, he explained, DEED provides information, resources, and leadership to Alaska's families, schools, policymakers, and education stakeholders to support an excellent education for every student every day. Today's presentation is an example of this, he added.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON reviewed the oversight of Alaska's public schools as outlined on slide 6. He said the legislature has made clear that Alaska's schools are to be governed and operated by locally elected school boards. In some ways, locally elected school boards are where democracy gets closest to the family, he stated. School boards establish policy and educational programs for the students enrolled in their schools. The legislature, he continued, has given DEED general supervision over public schools with an emphasis on distributing funds appropriated by the legislature and federal government, and the department's authority is appropriately limited to that which is given to it by the Alaska State Legislature.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON displayed slide 7 and described DEED's core services and functions as represented in the legislature's budget documents and in keeping with statutory authority. Regarding the core function of distributing public school funding, he said DEED ensures that funding is appropriately distributed to recipients based on legislative appropriation, statute, and in accordance with the foundation formula that's in statute and other formula programs. Examples of this function include the foundation program, pupil transportation, additional foundation funding, boarding home grants, residential schools, youth and detention special schools, charter school grants, and some student and school achievement. Regarding the core function of providing fiscal accountability, compliance, and oversight, Commissioner Johnson specified that DEED ensures it effectively and efficiently manages state, federal, and other funding by providing comprehensive fiscal and administrative services. Examples of this include executive administration, which is his office; administrative services; information services; school finance and facilities; child nutrition; student and school achievement; and teacher certification.

8:14:43 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON continued addressing slide 7. Regarding the core function of developing, implementing, and maintaining school effectiveness programs, he explained that DEED assists school districts by providing programs, technical on-site and distant delivery support, early intervention services, and efforts to increase the statewide graduation rate. He emphasized that the statute calls upon DEED to assist and support the instructional programs that are chosen and operated by the locally elected school boards, the school districts. Examples of this include State System of Support (SSOS), Head Start and early education programs, pre-kindergarten grants, Alaska Performance Scholarship Awards, and Alaska education grants to the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON remained on slide 7. He explained that the fourth core function is providing opportunities for, and collaborating with, government entities and other public and private organizations to engage in active partnerships in pursuit of state educational goals. He said there are more student and school achievement supports through various other programs and financial support like the Alaska Mental Health Trust. Included in this function is early education coordinating, like Best Beginnings and Parents as Teachers. Also included in this function is the Alaska State Council on

the Arts, which resides in DEED; the Professional Teaching Practices Commission; Mt. Edgecumbe School and Mt. Edgecumbe facilities; the state library operations, archives, and museums; the Broadband Assistance Program; and the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, which includes the Washington, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho (WWAMI) Program and loan servicing.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said the department's organizational chart depicted on slide 8 represents many dozens of skilled state employees who serve their fellow Alaskans and the committee. He specified that DEED has about 185 staff members and distributes roughly \$8.3 million per staff member in grants that go out the door. He pointed out that the State Board of Education and Early Development oversees the department. He explained that Alaska statute designates the state board as the head of DEED, which is unique among all state departments, and the state board is supervisor of the commissioner. The governor appoints the members of the board, and they are subject to confirmation by a majority of legislators in a joint session. He noted that the department is comprised of five divisions: Division of Innovation & Education Excellence; Division of Finance & Support Services; Division of Administrative Services; Division of Libraries, Archives & Museums; and Mt. Edgecumbe High School. He further noted that within the department are three commissions - the Alaska State Council on the Arts (ASCA), the Professional Teaching Practices Commission (PTPC), and the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) - and each commission is overseen by a designated board established in statute. He pointed out that ACPE appears under DEED only for administrative and budget purposes and that the department has no authority over ACPE.

[8:18:27 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND inquired whether the number of 185 encompasses all the employees currently under the DEED umbrella.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied he doesn't think it includes the boards and commissions. He said he would get back to the committee in this regard.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND stated that in 2013 when she started with the legislature the department had significantly more employees. She suggested that the historical difference between the number of employees in 2013 and today be addressed during the budget process discussion.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON agreed that this could be done.

8:19:45 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON addressed the five strategic priorities of Alaska's Education Challenge outlined on slide 9. He related that the Alaska Education Challenge is the result of work done over the last four years by parents, students, educators, policymakers, tribal leaders, partner organizations, local school boards, and several committee members to create a shared vision for improving Alaska's public education system.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON discussed the first shared priority shown on slide 9 to support all students to read at grade level by the end of third grade. He reported that just 37 percent of Alaska's third graders read at or above grade level on some assessments. Commissioner Johnson explained that before third grade, students are learning to read, and beginning in fourth grade and beyond, in general a student needs to be prepared to learn to read across all subjects. Research shows that a person's ability to read is a critical predictor of educational and lifelong success, he continued. Reading well in the early grades is particularly important for students with high levels of socioeconomic risk, such as poverty and high mobility. He recalled the hard work done last year on [the Alaska Reads Act, Senate Bill 6], but that the pandemic truncated working on the bill. He said he looks forward to working with committee members again on this priority.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON continued on slide 9. Regarding the second shared priority to increase career, technical, and culturally relevant education to meet student and workforce needs, he reported that Alaska students who take two or more career and technical (CT) credits in high school, including at least one credit of content specific rigorous study, achieved 20 percent higher graduation rates. There is evidence, he added, that classroom instruction that is aligned with a student's culture increases his or her likelihood of success, and therefore DEED looks forward to working with the committee on this priority.

8:22:34 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON addressed the third shared priority shown on slide 9 to close the achievement gap by ensuring equitable educational rigor and resources. He related that Alaska has achievement gaps between student groups that are very large, such as a 54 percent gap in average fourth grade reading scores.

An equitable education system, he said, means that every Alaskan family has access to high quality, rigorous, culturally relevant learning opportunities and resources for excellent education regardless of any inequalities that may exist in the system. Tribal compacting and chartering are examples of the kind of commitment and family ownership of education that will help ensure that all students receive an excellent education.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON remained on slide 9 and spoke to the fourth shared priority to prepare, attract, and retain effective education professionals. He acknowledged that in the past the committee has given great attention to this issue, and pointed out that nearly two-thirds of all Alaska teachers come from out of state, which needs to be changed. He said national research suggests that outcomes improve when students receive quality instruction from well-prepared teachers and that teacher turnover negatively impacts those outcomes. He related that last year the governor formed the Teacher Retention and Recruitment Working Group, and he looks forward to sharing the results of the group's teacher retention survey and recommendations.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON turned to the fifth shared priority on slide 9 to improve the safety and well-being of students through school partnerships with families, communities, and tribes. He stated that this past year has reminded everyone daily how important safety and well-being is for students and staff, and that there is no greater shared responsibility than to create conditions that enable children to be joyful, healthy, and achieve their fullest potential. He said he looks forward to working with the committee on this. In summary, he specified that these five priorities shape and guide DEED's daily work, as well as DEED's work with school districts.

[8:24:59 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON, in response to Representative Hopkins, stated that he started as commissioner in 2016 under Governor Walker and is now serving with Governor Dunleavy.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked whether Commissioner Johnson was part of developing the Alaska Education Challenge [under the Walker Administration].

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that he has been included since its start in January 2017, which began with a survey that had thousands of respondents. He said there was then a big

gathering in Anchorage at which Co-Chair Drummond urged him to continue the work. So, while he was part of this, it was a project that involved many people throughout the state.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS expressed his appreciation for having a guiding policy document like this that can be carried over from one administration to the next. Drawing attention to the fifth priority, he said he is an advocate for stronger social and emotional learning and education in schools. He requested the commissioner to elaborate about what DEED has done, what DEED has seen at school districts, and what a path forward might be under priority five as the state attempts to rebound from the impacts of the past twelve months.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON answered that three shared commitments tie the priorities together. He explained that before coming up with the five priorities, DEED worked with school boards and others around the state to agree to share commitments to the priorities and work together on them. These commitments are fundamental to success in these priorities, he continued, and are in the full Alaska Educational Challenge document. Regarding safety and well-being, Commissioner Johnson related that research indicates that schools that are warm, inviting, secure, and build meaningful relationships with every student and staff member, address the physical, health, and mental needs. The department didn't address this on its own, he noted; DEED worked with the Alaska Association of School Boards and created the Trauma Informed Framework. A toolkit was created to go with that, which can be found on the DEED website, and online training for teachers is associated with that. To date, DEED has received 6,000 requests for copies of this framework. Utilizing that framework is one way to move forward, he said.

[8:30:54 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND complimented Commissioner Johnson on a moving speech he previously gave to people from all over the state. She requested the commissioner to provide new committee members with DEED's document from last year regarding the Trauma Informed Framework, given it informs the committee's work. A big discovery in the Alaska Education Challenge, she noted, is how much attention needs to be paid to trauma impacts on students and families in order to educate students effectively.

[8:31:36 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GILHAM asked whether there is anything school districts can do to get parents more involved in regard to reading proficiency.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that there are multiple ways. One example, he said, is the state supported Parents as Teachers program founded by Representative Tuck. The program supports families in doing activities at home to prepare kids for the trajectory of becoming reading proficient by the end of third grade. Since the pandemic, school districts are helping via partnerships with apps for iPads and other online programs. Alaska Public Television, he continued, has developed programs for television that support kids learning to read. Information is provided to parents about activities that can be done to prepare kids for that trajectory. He explained that learning to read is a trajectory that starts right after birth with hearing sounds and learning to comprehend.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND noted that the Department of Health & Social Services administers the Parents as Teachers program.

[8:34:12 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY said she is excited about tribal compacting in education. She requested an update on a timeframe for draft legislation, or concepts for the legislature to consider, regarding the tribal compacting concept.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that he too is excited about this opportunity. He said the case for tribal compacting, tribal charter, working with tribes in education, has never been stronger because of the amazing work over the last 10 months by tribal health. Around the state, tribal health has been part of a successful response to the pandemic. The partnerships between school districts and tribal health have allowed many Alaska students to have in-person learning, he related. Many communities were quick to vaccinate teachers through tribal health networks. Based on that, there is every reason to move further into these conversations with confidence and enthusiasm. For example, DEED has signed agreements with Knik Tribal Education Agency and with Tanana Chiefs. He noted that tribal compacting is complex in terms of what legislation looks like. Tribal groups around the state are already starting education work, he continued, and he looks forward to working with Representative Zulkosky on what components are wanted by everyone in a bill. The timeline is hard to predict, as he doesn't want a bill to be submitted that doesn't have the

support of tribes, he explained. That is why DEED is spending so much time working with tribes to determine the elements and components that tribes want to see and support in a bill.

8:38:38 AM

REPRESENTATIVE STORY related that this last year she has served on the National Council of State Legislators' International Study Group of other high performing countries and what components of their education system have gotten them to where they are. She said the five priorities in the Alaska Education Challenge all fall into those components, so Alaska is on the right track in its work for good outcomes for its kids. She advised that the committee's work on education is also about the economy because it is about the state's future citizens and workforce. In regard to the effort on student reading by the end of third grade, Representative Story asked whether work has been done to assess all the components being looked for in the reading bill because they need to be happening now in all of Alaska's school districts. She further asked whether evaluation has been done of the assessments provided by the districts and the reading curriculums they are using. Whether or not the reading bill goes forward, she opined, it must be ensured that Alaska's school districts are already doing the components of a strong reading program. She inquired about what the components are and whether the department can give more support. She asked whether DEED has from each district the assessment of reading, and what groups of students in each district need more support, and the plan for how they are doing that for certain students. She requested the commissioner's thoughts in this regard.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON answered that in terms of assessment, DEED has gathered minimal data over the past year because the focus has been on mitigation and the pandemic. Though districts have been doing some of that work, he said DEED has been careful not to add a burden on top of all the other things districts are doing in terms of reporting. There is the Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant, he continued, which is going on in 16 or so districts and DEED will have information for the committee in this regard at some point coming up. Moving forward, the department will continue the work, assess, and get information on those components; it is relevant to have situational awareness to effectively implement any legislation that may pass the legislature. He noted that the state board recently updated DEED's early learning standards as part of that work moving forward.

8:43:34 AM

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK stated he is excited to be on this committee since he is a graduate of Alaska's public schools and university, was a teacher for 25 years and retired, and served on a regional school board. In regard to the second priority, he said he thinks that especially in Alaska's rural schools focusing on vocational life skills is critical because to be successful in its education system Alaska is going to need to develop its natural resources and create opportunities for those kids to learn. Regarding the fifth priority, he said there needs to be focus on the well-being of Alaska's kids as well as teaching them how to be resilient and have the proper coping skills to deal with anything that life throws at them, the pandemic being an example. As a teacher, he said he thinks those skills are missing in Alaska's schools, but allowed that funding and having the right counselors in schools have been a part of that. He stated he would like to sit down with the commissioner to talk about these things.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON quipped that the best place to discuss the aforementioned is at "Fast Eddies because it's his favorite restaurant." He said he looks forward to working with the representative on those and concurred that the pandemic has highlighted the need for both of those issues.

8:45:44 AM

ERIN HARDIN, Special Assistant to the Commissioner/Legislative Liaison, Office of the Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), drew attention to the informational links listed on slide 10 for the two topics that legislators and constituents most ask about - school finance and facilities, and early learning programs. She said online information [for school finance and facilities] is available for budgeted or audited district operating fund reports and annual audited revenue reports required under AS 14.03.120. The department produces annual foundation reports, historical reports, and a number of informational publications, she continued. The fiscal year 2021 (FY 21) Student Count Period and Hold Harmless Provision White Paper was one of the most heavily read informational publications produced this past fall. The department houses an online school facility database and map, and also posts the annual capital improvement project (CIP) priority lists. She further advised that a number of dedicated web pages for early learning programs could be found that provide information about each program and/or grant that

receives state funding. The department recently produced a detailed white paper on the federal Head Start program, which includes information about the new FY 21 State Equitable Funding Formula, which was the result of legislative intent language included in the operating budget in 2019. She added that the department has an experienced and long-standing fiscal team that is available to provide the committee with specific funding presentations.

8:48:40 AM

MS. HARDIN highlighted available constituent resources as listed on slide 11. She related that the vast majority of questions received by DEED are from constituents asking about teacher certification requirements. She said DEED has a dedicated team to support Alaska's educators with their certification needs and the department houses many informational resources on its website. Those include a number of online renewal options for educators as well as access to mandatory trainings through the department's eLearning online course catalog. She specified that last year DEED's eLearning program provided more than 60 trainings to districts at no cost and now serves more than 27,000 school district employees. The most heavily trafficked courses are those focused on school health and safety topics. She offered to help any committee members who would like to access the eLearning curriculum.

MS. HARDIN continued addressing slide 11. She related that in fall 2019, DEED launched an online data portal specifically for Alaska's families titled "The Compass: A Guide to Alaska's Schools." She explained that the purpose of the online portal is to provide Alaska's families with important information about their child's school so they can make the best decisions for their child's educational experience. The Compass presents school-level data that is reported to DEED by districts in an easily accessible and understandable format. For example, she continued, visitors can review a profile of their individual school, can compare their school's performance data over multiple years, can compare two schools in their district or neighboring district, and explore educational options in their school district and across the state. The website includes an option for the public to provide feedback. Last year DEED expanded the information available on The Compass to include data relating to per-pupil expenditures of local, state, and federal funds, which was done in accordance with the new federal education requirements in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

8:51:20 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON addressed the COVID-19 update provided on slide 12. He said COVID-19 has been an enormous challenge for Alaska's schools, and the department is dedicated to developing a stronger and better education system as a result of this trial. He advised that everything today and in the future is based on exceptional partnerships that are had with others. Compared to other states, the collaboration and communication that has taken place in Alaska between districts and educational partners has been remarkable. He thanked Alaska's teachers, school administrators, parents, and educational partners that have been relentless in facing the challenges of COVID-19 and creating opportunity for students. Thanks to the coordination efforts of the Alaska Council of School Administrators, he said, regular weekly meetings have been held throughout the pandemic with superintendents, principals, fellow education stakeholder organizations, and medical staff. He offered thanks for the partnership of the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), which hired and dedicated medical staff to be available to support school districts and schools.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON continued addressing slide 12. He thanked the many tribal health organizations that have partnered with their local school districts through this. He said DHSS has held weekly ECHO [Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes] sessions, a kind of webinar to help all kinds of stakeholders make decisions throughout the pandemic. He further noted that thanks to the partnership of the Southeast Regional Resource Center and the Region 16 Comprehensive Center, DEED was able to quickly stand up a number of resources and webinar series on a website called aklearns.org, which is serving as a hub and clearing house of resources for teachers and families that are still dealing with the pandemic. One example of the webinar series, he continued, is called "Beyond the Bell," an afterschool opportunity for high demand topics. Additionally, there are webinars for school maintenance staff and bus drivers on how to deal with the pandemic.

8:53:43 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON remained on slide 12. He offered thanks to the National Education Association of Alaska (NEA-Alaska) for its partnership with DEED to provide access to the Alaska Learns Commons. He explained that this statewide, shared warehouse of K-12 course content for all educators can be accessed on a learning management system called [the Canvas Learning

Management Platform]. He related that the School Boards Association has hosted virtual meetings for school board members dealing with legal issues and other topics associated with response to the pandemic. He said the department has worked with philanthropy to get donations of hundreds of thousands of bottles of hand sanitizer, personal protective equipment (PPE), and other resources for school districts. Initially last spring, he continued, a major focus of the department's COVID-19 response was the Alaska Smart Start 2020 for re-opening schools in the fall. Along with DHSS, the department published the Smart Start 2020 framework for districts and most districts began their planning last May and June for school.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON related that DEED is in the process of reviewing and updating based on new CDC guidance, and shifting the focus to more recovery and getting schools open and what the next school year is going to look like. He said the Comprehensive Center helped DEED create the aforementioned website to connect the public with individual school districts and their plans. He added that he will provide committee members with the information so members can connect to that website and see the districts' Smart Start 2020 plans.

[8:58:10 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON moved to slide 13 and provided further update regarding COVID-19 response. In March 2020, he reported, DEED stood up the Alaska Statewide Virtual System to provide information resources and leadership during the spring closure. In blending that with [the Canvas Learning Management Platform], over 300 teachers have now been provided training in online delivery, and 37 districts are part of that platform and have requested access. He explained that the statewide Canvas Learning Management Platform brings all of this together for districts, and DEED has secured this platform for the rest of this school year and the next two school years so that educators can be a part of that commons. He said 25 districts are currently actively using this learning management system, which is being accessed by 70,000 individual students and teachers.

[9:00:16 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY requested an update on COVID-19 vaccinations for teaching staff.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that Governor Dunleavy and DHSS announced a week ago that teachers are now prioritized. All the

teachers in some communities have been vaccinated, he said, and at a large Anchorage high school about 75 percent of the staff have been vaccinated. This provides a level of comfort and security and is turbo-boosting the level of return to in-person learning. He pointed out that the vaccination of school staff includes tribal health and the work they have done in many communities.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked about the statewide virtual system and the support of teachers in their professional development and learning. She inquired about the Alaska Staff Development Network (ASDN) and the modules that are being provided. She further inquired about the cost per teacher for professional development modules that are being taken by teachers.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON answered that the Alaska Staff Development Network has been providing lots of online support for teachers around virtual delivery and other subjects. He reported that their Response to Instruction/Intervention (RTI) conference this year had lots of sessions around this and was the most highly attended RTI conference in history with well over 1,000 members attending. The resources provided by DEED are at no charge, he said, but he isn't sure about the charges for ASDN courses.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked how staff accesses Alaska Commons.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that there is the statewide Alaska Commons, each district has its own section within that, and teachers sign up through their districts to get access. He said many districts were already using the Canvas Learning Management [Platform] prior to the pandemic, and DEED bought that as a statewide license so districts wouldn't have to purchase it themselves.

[9:04:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked whether COVID-19 vaccines would also be available for support staff in Alaska's schools.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON answered yes.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS commented that often the first and last person that students see at school is support staff. He inquired whether the Alaska statewide virtual system with the different learning delivery models is available for support staff as well as for teachers.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that support staff members are critical to operating the school system, and this includes instructional aides, bus drivers, cooks, school nurses, school secretaries, and others who make the school system work. He said the department's statewide license provides for these staff members to have access to [the Canvas Learning Management Platform] and they can sign up through their own districts where their districts choose to use it.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS offered his support for everyone who makes the schools run in addition to the teachers.

[9:06:29 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE GILHAM inquired whether vaccinations were mandatory for teachers to keep teaching.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded no, and added he wasn't aware of it being mandatory anywhere in the state. He said some teachers have chosen not to be vaccinated, but vaccination is available to all who choose to receive the vaccine.

[9:07:05 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK thanked the commissioner for working closely with the Alaska Gateway School District. He related that the district is working with village councils to help with adjusting school calendars.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON answered that he appreciates the creative thinking and ideas of Superintendent MacManus and he has shared those ideas with other school districts.

[9:08:17 AM](#)

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON resumed his presentation. He explained that slide 14 highlights what was mentioned by Ms. Hardin regarding The Compass. He said no school is completely successful without parent and community involvement, and DEED created this website for the public and policymakers to both celebrate and support their local schools. Transparency and public education should be inseparable, he stated, and The Compass helps them to stay linked. The Compass provides achievement data, financial data, contact information, and compares and contrasts different schools. He said the department looks forward to growing those where districts can

highlight the many things happening for kids in school districts every day.

9:09:31 AM

REPRESENTATIVE STORY related that [Juneau's] superintendent has said that as students return to school the impacts on students and the learning loss are quite sobering. She asked whether the commissioner's perspective is that it is going to be a one-year or multi-year catch up process of getting students back to where [they should be].

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that children are too precious to predict their future and he doesn't know what the impact will be or how long it will be. He said he wants to make sure [that schools] are ready to address those challenges for the long term and not assume that it's a temporary issue. Students will have varying degrees of impacts from what has happened over the last year, he advised, and he wants the system to be ready to provide varying degrees of support for those students and families as they need it for the rest of this year, next year, and beyond if necessary. He stressed that when a student is not proficient in reading around the end of third grade it impacts the student for the rest of his or her school career. He said some students are going to need extra support throughout the remainder of their school career to make sure they stay or get on track. The bottom line, he continued, is to not let the pandemic thwart the dreams and hopes of any student.

9:11:58 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON discussed the enrollment data and demographics portrayed on slide 15. He pointed out that the numbers on the slide represent individual students - little girls in third grade, young men in tenth grade, some that love music or sports, some that are learning trades, and some who are reading a book for their first time. As well, the numbers represent students that are happy and students that are living in trauma. Every single student is a gift to this world and every one of them can learn, he said. The numbers depicted are less about the funding and the counts, and more about the responsibility to each and every student.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON explained that the achievement data on the next few slides should inform policy discussions, but that it is only a partial view as he just described. He reminded members that even where Alaska is underperforming, good things are

happening in classrooms around the state every day. He said slide 16 is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is known as the nation's report card because it is the only assessment that is given the same in every single state in the U.S. It is nationally representative so scientific means are used to determine the number of students that take it every year, he advised. A sample of students across Alaska in grades 4 and 8 are tested every other year in math and reading. He pointed out that 2021 was a year that NAEP was supposed to be administered, but the federal government postponed it because of the pandemic. Currently, the plan is to administer NAEP in 2022, which means that updated NAEP data will probably not be received until the end of 2022. He noted that Alaska's graduation rate last year was about 79 percent.

9:15:52 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON moved to slide 17 regarding NAEP grade 4 reading. He reported that only about 25 percent of Alaska students performed at or above the proficient level, which ranked Alaska 50 out of 50 states. He said that regardless of what someone thinks about the assessments, Alaska still doesn't compare well with other states.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON spoke to slide 18 regarding NAEP grade 8 reading. He stated that Alaska is at about 23 percent and ranked 47 out of 50 states.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON displayed slide 19 regarding NAEP grade 4 math. He related that about 33 percent of Alaska students were rated at or above [proficient]. He showed slide 20 regarding NAEP grade 8 math and reported that about 29 percent of Alaska students performed at or above proficient. He pointed out that the aforementioned figures are from 2019, and therefore before the pandemic.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON said slides 21 and 22 depict the [2019] Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools (PEAKS), a unique-to-Alaska English and math assessment administered in grades 3 through 9, and science assessment administered in grades 4, 8, and 10. About 76,000 students participated in the spring 2019 administration, he said, but PEAKS was not administered in 2020 because of the pandemic. The PEAKS assessment is tied to the tens of millions of dollars in federal funding that Alaska receives, he advised; not in terms of the outcomes but that Alaska administers a unique statewide assessment.

[9:18:48 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX stated that these scores are disturbing and seem to be trending in the wrong direction. He asked whether the NAEP tests for proficiency are compared to a standard or compared to everyone else.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that the answer is both. He explained that the NAEP Governing Board is comprised of governors, educators, and others, and sets the standard for what is going to be assessed; it is a general knowledge kind of assessment in reading and math. He noted that assessments are also given in other subjects, but Alaska hasn't participated in those. The reporting of the results is comparative with other states, he said, so a statistical sampling is done in every state; reports are then done and that is where the comparability comes in among other states and some territories.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX requested the commissioner to elaborate on the PEAK testing that is unique to Alaska but yet tied to federal funding.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that in the mid-1960s a federal law was passed called the Elementary Secondary Education Act. It has taken on different forms over the decades, he explained, recently being No Child Left Behind and most recently being ESSA. Those Acts require as part of receiving federal title dollars in education that each state set standards and then assess those standards. So, PEAKS is Alaska's assessment of its standards tied to Alaska submitting an application for ESSA.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX said he wants to follow up on this later to understand better, to try to identify the causes, and determine what to do next.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND offered assurance that there would be follow-up in terms of assessments, generally speaking.

[9:22:25 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS observed on slides 17-20 that there are scales of 0 to 500 and calculated that Alaska's students score 2% less out of a total of 500 points on this national standardized test. He asked whether that 2% gap between Alaska and the nation is demonstrating that Alaska is 50 out of 50 states.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON answered that most people think in terms of a 100-point scale, with 90-100 being an A. But standardized assessments use a different kind of scale, he explained. The NAEP assessment is a scale of 0 to 500 and different questions are weighted differently in terms of points. So the analysis is a bit more complex than just somebody getting a 497 and someone 437 because there are different weighted questions and that sort of thing. He drew attention to the notes at the bottom of some of the slides that state whether the change is statistically significant. He offered to provide committee members with information from the NAEP Governing Board that goes into technical detail about the scale, the comparability, and what up or down movement on that may or may not represent.

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS quipped that the committee would need a statistics teacher to be present for such a hearing to explain the statistics. For example, he said, the bottom of slide 18 states that .05 is significantly different, yet it is a .02 difference between 262 and 252.

9:25:23 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND observed that the Y-axis on slide 17 is missing everything from 0 to 190 and from 240 to 500. She said that if this graph were presented with all of those numbers on the Y-axis, the difference would be much smaller. When looking at the graph provided, it looks like the difference between the national average and the Alaska average is about 20 percent. If it were instead looked at on the full scale of the Y-axis from 0 to 500, she stated, that difference would not be statistically insignificant, but it would be visually much different. She asked whether the graphs are provided by NAEP or DEED.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that the graphs are taken right off NAEP's national website. He noted that DEED only gets statewide data, not individual district data from NAEP, and so that's another factor in looking at these numbers.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND further observed that each graph has different parts of the Y-axis that are missing.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX advised that care needs to be taken when looking at charts and data, which is why he asked whether this is compared to some standard or compared to each other. He said that if it is compared to a standard then this is of concern.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND agreed.

9:27:50 AM

REPRESENTATIVE STORY recalled the commissioner's statement that NAEP testing was waived in 2019 and said she doesn't know if that will be the case for this year. She further recalled that last year Commissioner Johnson waived the requirements for testing for the Alaska Performance Scholarship. She inquired whether that would be the case again for this year for both NAEP and the Alaska Performance Scholarship.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that NAEP would not be given in 2021 because the federal government has postponed it to 2022. Regarding the PEAKS assessment, he said DEED just received a letter from U.S. Secretary of Education Cardona that there will not be blanket waivers for statewide assessments this year, so DEED is moving forward to administer PEAKS. The department is working with its education partners at the federal level to determine what that may or may not look like, he continued. There is some flexibility in that administration, but where students are in school, it seems like Alaska is expected to give that statewide assessment. He stated that Executive Director Sana Efird of the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education is working on the Alaska Performance Scholarship issue and would like to make the scholarship accessible to all students given the current situation.

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked whether PEAKS, which costs millions of dollars to administer, is still charging for the test since a year was missed due to the pandemic. She further asked whether Dynamic Learning Maps could meet Alaska's federal requirements.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON answered that he would provide specific contract information to the committee. He said there have been some adjustments, but last year [the state] was right at the time to administer the assessment so the vendor had already incurred a lot of cost. But, he advised, work has been done with the vendor to adjust that. According to the letter that he recently received from the U.S. Department of Education, MAP assessments would not be allowed to serve as [Alaska's] statewide assessment due to a number of technical reasons in terms of the adaptability of the assessment. The contract for PEAKS was up, he stated, and [DEED] has been working with educators to revise the assessment system so that it is more efficient and provides the needed data without having multiple layers of assessment, such as PEAKS and MAPS, but this year Map would not be able to count for Alaska's statewide assessment.

9:32:38 AM

REPRESENTATIVE STORY stressed the importance of reading by the end of third grade, given it is needed for all subjects. She stated she hopes the committee's work on teaching reading is clear to others, including its work on the proposed Alaska Reads Act. She said she wants to know the components that are being used to teach and what assessments are being used. She inquired whether DEED has been working with the University of Alaska College of Education and the components it is using for a strong reading program.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied that he and President Pitney communicate regularly working on making sure the Board of Regents and Board of Education are communicating, collaborating, and discussing the aforementioned issues. He recently talked with Posie Boggs, he related, and the entire discussion was focused on teacher preparation specifically around reading instruction. So, he said, reading is a topic of conversation, partnership, and collaboration that is going forward.

9:35:37 AM

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON returned to his PowerPoint presentation. Addressing slide 23, he said the 2019 NAEP results are a call to action, not an impossible challenge, but an opportunity for improvement. He expressed his confidence that Alaska has the people and the resources to face that challenge. He said DEED is focusing attention on the following priorities: 1) a \$20 million grant was received for literacy, state development working with 16 districts, and other work around literacy and reading; 2) DEED's redesign of the state system of support coaching program, which is currently underway and is targeting training for principals, school staff, and teachers designed to support literacy, leadership in schools, early reading instruction, and the use of data to inform how to best address problems; 3) a \$9.1 million Project Aware grant was received in September 2020 for advancing wellness and resiliency in education. This grant will assist the state in improving mental health by growing mental health literacy, reducing mental health stigma, strengthening early identification and intervention for student mental health conditions, as well as providing more robust services for students in a number of districts and hopefully being a model for other places in the state. While those are just three examples, he said, it's important to note

that it's going to take all Alaskans working together to ensure every student has equitable opportunity to succeed and learn.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON explained that slide 24 is a list of questions for pondering, looking forward to, and respecting this committee and appreciating the opportunity to talk about things in the future. He said every person on the committee has ideas worth discussing in regard to the question of how to confront Alaska's education challenges. Other questions include: How to resource an excellent education today without jeopardizing the responsibility to Alaska's future students? How can funding be made to work better for students? How to rebuild and recover from COVID-19? How to be more transparent so as to invite more folks into Alaska's public education system? Commissioner Johnson thanked the committee for inviting the department to speak today.

[9:39:33 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY offered her appreciation for ways to include families in this work, CT education in middle and high schools, and working with the university. She noted that districts aren't satisfied either with where the state is now. It is critical for the committee to look at reading, she said.

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX stated he appreciates what the commissioner said about serving today's children while keeping future children in mind.

[9:42:58 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:42 a.m. to 9:43 a.m.

PRESENTATION(S): FY 2021 Student Enrollment & COVID-19 Federal Relief Funding

[9:43:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND announced that the next order of business was a presentation titled, "FY 2021 Student Enrollment & COVID-19 Federal Relief Funding."

[9:45:17 AM](#)

HEIDI TESHNER, Director, Division of Finance and Support Services-Administrative Services, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), began her PowerPoint presentation

titled "FY 2021 Student Enrollment Counts & COVID-19 Federal Relief Funding." She said she would be providing the committee with updates on FY 21 statewide enrollment counts, the foundation payment and advances process, the federal impact aid disparity test, and state-funded formula programs that are affected by the shifts in student enrollments. She noted that due to time constraints the discussion of COVID-19 federal relief funding would be provided at a later date.

MS. TESHNER turned to slide 3 and explained the legislature has provided in a formula in statute for funding school operational costs. Referred to as the Public School Funding Formula, she said it's more commonly known as the Foundation Formula. It was adopted under Senate Bill 36 in 1998 and implemented in 1999.

[9:46:45 AM](#)

MS. TESHNER moved to slide 4 and said the foundation formula is defined in Alaska Statute (AS) 14.17. She explained that the funding for each district is a combination of state aid, required local contribution, and federal impact aid. She noted that Alaska's 19 Regional Education Attendance Areas (REAAs) do not have a local contribution. A school district is only eligible for foundation funding as it's calculated under the formula and set out under AS 14.17.410, she said. The first step in determining state aid for a district is determining the average daily membership (ADM) of each school. She pointed out the links provided on the slide for the school finance website. She said data can be found for the foundation formula website, various publications, historical average daily membership data, state aid, Base Student Allocation history, annual foundation reports, and the disparity test memos and explanations. She drew attention to the supplemental handouts provided to the committee - an eight-page document titled "Public School Funding Program Overview" that walks through each step of the formula, and a 1-page document titled "Alaska Public School Funding Foundation Formula History" that outlines changes to the funding formula over time.

[9:49:03 AM](#)

MS. TESHNER spoke to the annual count period information shown on slide 5. She explained that the average daily membership (ADM) is defined as the student count data and is the number of enrolled students during the 20-school-day count period ending the fourth Friday of October. For the 2020-2021 school year, the 20-day count period began on September 28 and ended on

October 23. To determine state aid, she said districts must submit their student count data (their ADM) to the department within two weeks after the count period ends, in accordance with AS 14.17.600(a). The numbers for the 2020-2021 school year count period were due to the department on November 6, she noted. So, based on statute, the student count data for the count period is the starting point for all calculations that lead to determining state aid for each school district.

[9:50:11 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked what month the funding would begin following the September 28-October 23, 2020, count.

MS. TESHNER replied that slide 12 of the presentation provides this information but explained that DEED has gone through its reconciliation process, and its April, May, and June payments for this school year will reflect what those October counts came out to be. The department is truing it up now, she continued, and the districts' last three payments of the last three months of this fiscal year will be what the 2021 foundation formula trued-up amounts will be.

[9:51:39 AM](#)

MS. TESHNER discussed the FY 21 statewide school enrollment counts depicted on slide 6. She noted the table at the top of the slide shows the statewide FY 21 Online Alaska School Information System (OASIS) update count data compared to the FY 21 projected count data and the FY 2020 actual. She further noted that the FY 22 projected count data is also shown and compared to the FY 21 OASIS count data. She explained that the FY 21 projected data is the data that was submitted to the department in November 2019 in accordance with AS 14.17.500, and those counts are used to prepare the FY 21 governor's budget. The projected data is used for budgeting purposes at the state level, she continued, and there is no provision that allows DEED to pay on projected data. The FY 21 OASIS update data is the results of the department's reconciliation and review of the student count data provided by districts during the 20-day count period that ended on October 23, 2020. Annually the department reviews the initial data submitted to remove all duplicates to ensure that no student receives more than one ADM, as well as reviewing the department's special education intensive student reviews. After that process is done the department has come up with its OASIS update information that is of December 18. She noted that DEED is still finalizing its review of the special

education intensive counts, so any changes as a result of that review are not reflected in the numbers being provided to the committee in this presentation. The FY 22 projected data is what was provided to the department in November 2020 in accordance with statute, she explained, and those counts were used to determine the governor's FY 22 budget.

MS. TESHNER continued her discussion of slide 6. She drew attention to the student count data at the top of the slide and reported that the FY 21 OASIS regular ADM (brick-and-mortar ADM) has decreased 15,352.91, a 13.4 percent decrease, compared to the department's FY 21 projected data. The FY 21 OASIS correspondence ADM has increased 13,445.80, or a [94.9] percent increase over the FY 21 projected, with an overall ADM decrease of 1,907.11 or a 1.5 percent decrease compared to FY 21 projected. She said the overall adjusted ADM is an increase of 5,698.09 or a 2.2 percent increase compared to FY 21. She explained that slides 8 and 9 provide a glance at the factors that determine the districts' adjusted ADM and the statewide adjusted ADM. "The factors that are contributing to the increase in adjusted average daily membership," she pointed out, "is due to changes in our school size ADMs, the hold harmless provision, and shifts in correspondence, so shifting from brick and mortar to correspondence."

[9:55:57 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked where the 1,907 students have gone in the total ADM production; for example, whether they have left the state or gone to private schools. She said some schools do exit interviews of students who have left the district.

MS. TESHNER responded that the department doesn't collect data. Unless a student is enrolled in a public school, she continued, DEED doesn't know where they have gone. The districts, if they've done exit interviews, know if a student has left the state, or gone to a private school or private correspondence, or other non-Alaska public school system. So, she advised, the districts could easily answer that question.

[9:57:16 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked whether it would be possible for DEED to ask the districts for the reports with this information, as it would be helpful for the committee to know about the students and where they've gone.

MS. TESHNER agreed the department would ask the districts.

CHAIR DRUMMOND related that the state demographer has noted that lots of families have left the state, and therefore in turn students have left the state.

[9:58:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX inquired as to how DEED arrived at the projections for FY 22. He observed that the department is projecting 8.8 percent of students coming back to brick and mortar and 31 percent of correspondence students leaving.

MS. TESHNER answered that the projected numbers are provided directly by the districts; the districts project what their enrollments will look like in the following year. She explained that every November the districts analyze the trends that they've had, and the conversations that they've had, and many districts have heard from parents that they want their kids to come back to the brick and mortar if they have gone to the correspondence. She said the department compiles the data received from the districts for budgeting purposes. There is no student identification behind any of the numbers, she noted. It is strictly a count that districts project will be for the next year; it is then trued up after the count period every year.

[9:59:54 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND concluded the hearing and stated that the presentation would be continued at a future meeting to be announced.

[10:00:23 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.